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Last Progressive Conservative senator laments the disappearance of her party's influence



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Jason Fekete

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heyday, a few hundred members in the House of Commons and Senate.

Alberta Senator Elaine McCoy — an environmentalist, human rights advocate and former Alberta provincial cabinet minister — is the one remaining federal Progressive Conservative parliamentarian in Canada.

The 66-year-old Calgarian sits under the Progressive Conservative banner in the Senate, where the designation still exists even though the federal political party disappeared nearly a decade ago. The party of Diefenbaker, Clark, Mulroney and Campbell was swallowed up by the new Conservative Party of Canada in 2003.

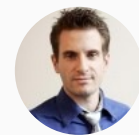
“I’m sorry to have seen that happen,” McCoy says. “I think it has created a (political) vacuum. There’s a vacuum in the middle right at the moment.”

McCoy believes the PCs’ principles of fiscal conservatism and more liberal social values survive in federal politics, even if the label is nearing extinction. But she’s concerned that being the last PC parliamentarian signals a troubling trend in the Canadian political system.

“I’m worried that we might be caught in that false dichotomy that the Americans are, with an either-or mentality; it’s a two-party polarization,” she says in an interview from her office on Parliament Hill. “What we need to understand in Canada is we are more diverse, we are a pluralistic society.”

While McCoy doesn’t support the federal Conservatives, she is a card-carrying member of the Alberta PC party and clings to those political roots.

Born in Brandon, Man., she moved to Wild Rose Country at



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an early age and completed a law degree at the University of Alberta, before pursuing a career as senior legal counsel for the province's energy regulator, working later in the private sector. She remains president of the Macleod Institute in Calgary, which specializes in economic and social program evaluations, and environmental management.

She served as a cabinet minister in former Alberta premier Don Getty's Progressive Conservative government in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Appointed to the Senate in 2005 by former Liberal prime minister Paul Martin, she is a classic example of a so-called Red Tory — another label that has been effectively wiped off the federal political map.

McCoy says there are other senators and MPs, including within the federal Conservative caucus, who still believe in the classic PC principles.

“Our traditions have not died. It means that we are still carrying the flag, and there are many of us. Not all of us are labelled Progressive Conservative anymore,” she adds. “I felt particularly bound to stay with my Progressive Conservative roots because one of the senator's jobs is to represent their region.”

She would like to see the Senate act as more than just a “sober second thought” in Canadian governance. She views the red chamber as a “council of elders” and arguably the best think-tank in Canada.

With no official party or caucus, she's a bit of a political lone ranger in the upper chamber. But McCoy believes she brings desperately needed “independence of thought” to the institution.

“The Senate is in danger of becoming an echo chamber, not an accountability chamber, because the members are voting with their caucuses, without exception almost,” she explains.

Recently retired Conservative senator David Angus, who was appointed by Brian Mulroney and sat for years as a Progressive Conservative, maintains the current Tory caucus has plenty of people who still fit the PC values.

“We are seen and we are portrayed — we, the Conservative Party of Canada — as being pretty far right, redneck people

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who are not protective of the environment and a whole lot of stuff that's totally false," Angus says.

"These are not a whole lot of people in cowboy boots and big hats."

McCoy says she wears her Alberta hat before that of any party, something reflected in her passionate advocacy on the oilsands: both the economic importance of the massive industrial development, but also the need for governments to improve the environmental management of the resource.

She argues the federal government is not doing enough to protect the environment and reduce greenhouse gas emissions from oilsands development.

Furthermore, environmental monitoring in the northern Alberta oilsands has been insufficient for decades, she says, although it's improving due to recent investments by the provincial and federal governments.

"It's my belief that the environmental and human health components of our developments in the oilsands could be much improved," she says.

Certainly, the oilsands are facing a prolonged image battle, but McCoy recognizes her institution — the Senate — has suffered its own public relations black eye in recent years.

The decades-long battle for an equal, elected and effective Senate has disillusioned many Canadians, while the government's own Senate reform bill — including a nine-year term limit and voluntary process for provinces electing senators — has been stuck in the House of Commons for more than a year.

McCoy opposes the government's plans for term limits and an elected Senate, fearing it will simply "cement having 105 more backbenchers," and erode independent thought and oversight in the upper house.

"The House of Commons and Senate are to be a counterweight to the executive branch," she says.

She acknowledges, however, the Senate appointment scheme could be drastically improved by searching for "people of stature" and following a recruitment process similar to what goes into naming the governor general or Supreme Court justices.

[With the \\$132,300 base salary for senators and lucrative parliamentary pension plan for a largely unelected institution, it's easy to see why many Canadians are cynical about the upper house.](#)

McCoy says the credibility of the Senate takes a beating because most senators simply rely on “colour-coated speaking notes” and no one speaks for the chamber.

Perhaps most disappointing to McCoy is what she views as the hyper-partisanship that has erupted in the Conservative-dominated Senate during her seven years sitting in the red chamber.

“The level of discourse has plummeted . . . It is taken as normal for politicians to be insulting,” she says.

McCoy worries the practice of attacking ideas, rather than the person, seems to have largely disappeared — much like the PC name.

“It seems as if that principle has been stood on its head.”

— With files from Jordan Press, Postmedia News

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


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